Democrats' Middle Lane Is Collapsing

levernews.com/democrats-middle-lane-is-collapsing

In Michigan's wild three-way Senate primary that could decide control of Congress, everyone has big questions in these final weeks before the election: What just sank one-time Democratic front-runner Mallory McMorrow? What is fueling the rise of populist Abdul El-Sayed? And what is still fortifying establishment candidate Rep. Haley Stevens?

After a few days of on-the-ground reporting in Michigan, I do not think the answer is only the one coursing through social media. I do not believe the race has been shaped mostly by McMorrow's attack on streamer Hasan Piker boomeranging against her and boosting El-Sayed's profile.

No, I believe McMorrow's downfall, El-Sayed's rise, and Stevens' persistence reflect a more structural shift in American politics.

McMorrow tried to find a path between two lanes: the new populist lane being forged by El-Sayed's campaign for Medicare for All, and the old establishment lane being paved by Stevens and the super PACs bankrolling her. And that middle path McMorrow tried to tiptoe down may no longer exist in Democratic politics.

"There's nothing in the middle of the road but a yellow stripe and dead armadillos," the activist and author Jim Hightower once warned. It was a viewpoint Bernie Sanders amplified in his 2020 presidential race when he declared that "there is no middle ground" in the fight against oligarchy.

Those concepts appear to be true in Michigan — a microcosm of America's economic and political turbulence.

This is the state where the booms and busts of the manufacturing industry have obliterated communities and bankrupted cities. This is the electoral arena whose voters delivered stunning Democratic primary wins to Jesse Jackson in 1988 and Bernie Sanders in 2016. It is also the home of the so-called Reagan Democrats — disaffected working-class voters who

shifted to the Republican Party and handed two stunning GOP general-election victories to the Gipper and two out of three to Donald Trump.

Now in the contest to replace retiring Democratic Sen. Gary Peters, Michigan is poised to once again be a fork in America's political road — with no middle lane. And because this swing state is so crucial, the results of its August 4 Senate primary will likely echo in states across the country.

Accountability You Can Wear

Check out *The Lever*'s merch. Every purchase supports holding the powerful accountable through the tireless independent journalism that corporate media will not do. **Free shipping on all orders.**

Show Now

"People Can't Afford To Wait For A Revolution"

The strategy of McMorrow, a 39-year-old state senator, was familiar to anyone who has paid attention to Democratic primaries over the last quarter century: Backed by a shadowy new network of national Democratic insiders, consultants, and big donors that was exposed by *The Lever*, McMorrow ran as a compromise candidate — a wine-track liberal between populist Bernie Sanders-endorsed El-Sayed and the corporate-friendly, Chuck Schumer-backed Stevens.

McMorrow had entered the race with a huge head of steam after her 2022 floor speech slamming Republicans went viral, earning her billing as a rising Democratic star.

In the three-way Senate race, McMorrow was positioned a bit like her top endorser, Sen. Elizabeth Warren, in the 2020 Democratic presidential primary — thoughtful, liberal, not quite as populist as Sanders, and not quite as establishment as Joe Biden.

Six years on from that primary, McMorrow ran aground like Warren before her: Her split-the-difference positioning in the Senate race ended up making her look like an inauthentic waffler or like the scold at the centrist rally insisting that better things aren't possible. And despite her saccharine dance at the state party convention, her down-the-middle politics ended up annoying a lot of voters.

Take McMorrow's attempt to cast herself as the race's principled crusader against AI-powered predatory pricing schemes. The tactic fell flat, in part, because McMorrow was simultaneously refusing to support that same crusade in her current state legislative job. Worse, she had backed big tax breaks for tech companies.

Same thing for her stances on corporate money in politics and aid to Israel's military — there was a lot of flipping and flopping, all while she rhetorically derided politicians' penchant for flip-flopping.

Perhaps the clearest example of McMorrow trying to thread an unthreadable needle was on healthcare. Beholding the healthcare crisis destroying Michigan, she somehow opted to position herself as both pro-public option and a skeptic of Medicare for All — an initiative supported by a whopping 91 percent of Democratic voters in the state, according to a recent Public Policy Polling survey.

At one point, McMorrow depicted Medicare for All as the kind of big government America wouldn't want Republicans running.

At another point, she insisted that the long-overdue initiative just isn't realistic, arguing that despite polls showing the opposite, "support for a true single-payer system isn't there yet."

In a May televised debate, McMorrow asserted: "People can't afford to wait for a revolution that may never come. People who are rationing their insulin right now can't afford to wait for Medicare for All when we have options on the table right now to lower prescription drug costs, to restore the ACA tax credits, to allow any Michigander who wants to to opt into Medicare."

The line echoed the much-lampooned 2020 "Medicare for All Who Want It" proposal from Pete Buttigieg, whose top aide, Lis Smith, has been advising McMorrow. It was also an almost word-for-word rendering of Hillary Clinton's infamously depressing declaration in 2016 that

“people who have health emergencies can’t wait for us to have a theoretical debate about some better idea that will never, ever come to pass.”

Within weeks of that jeremiad, Clinton lost Michigan’s Democratic primary to pro-Medicare-For-All crusader Bernie Sanders — perhaps foreshadowing McMorrow’s own free fall in the polls and suspension of her campaign in early July.

“I’m Dangerous”

As McMorrow’s candidacy in Democrats’ narrowing middle lane faltered over the last few months, El-Sayed’s campaign in the party’s widening populist lane has jumped ahead in both primary and general election polls. And that surge — fortified by endorsements from Sanders, Sen. Chris Van Hollen, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and the United Autoworkers — came as he has countered McMorrow specifically on healthcare.

“Revolution is definitely not coming if we’re not fighting for it,” he fired back at McMorrow in one of the big viral moments of the May televised debate — a moment in which he hammered his opponents for raking in campaign cash from health insurance donors. “We really can fight for a world where everybody can be guaranteed healthcare. I think we really should fight for that world because too many people in this country are going without the healthcare that they need and deserve.”

El-Sayed, the 41-year-old son of Egyptian immigrants, is offering an optimistic message of ambition at precisely a moment when Democratic voters seem to be craving a battle, particularly on Medicare for All, the defining cause of his campaign.

“People are under pressure, they understand that they’re getting a bad deal,” he told me a few weeks after that debate during our recent episode of *Lever Time*. “Our job is to go and fight for what we really can have if we’re willing to take the fight to them, if we’re willing to accommodate nothing to the insurance industry and the pharma industry and the hospital industry, and we’re willing to finally get what Americans deserve in this country.”

Watch on YouTube

Unlike his opponents, El-Sayed is not some Johnny-come-lately on healthcare. He has a medical degree and a public health PhD, he ran Detroit's health department, he waged a healthcare-focused campaign for governor in 2018, and he wrote a book on single-payer healthcare.

During our interview in a Warren, Michigan, coffee shop, he argued that the lesson of the demise of single-payer and a public option during the Obama presidency is not that far-reaching reforms are unrealistic — it is that the healthcare crisis has become so severe that political reality has fundamentally changed.

"There's a huge difference between now and 2008 in both the way that we move information and also how dire the problem has gotten," he told me. "Nowadays, not only is the problem worse — we pay more for health insurance that is less durable than what we'd had in the past, deductibles are at $5,000 average for a family of four and only going up, putting people into huge amounts of medical debt — but we also have the ability to compare across experiences. So we're a lot less likely to be dissuaded by all the money that they're gonna spend dissuading us from having Medicare for All."

On the campaign trail, he has leaned into his image as a gate-crashing outsider, flipping around his opponents' portrayal of him as too risky to bet Democrats' U.S. Senate hopes on. And he's always sure to mention healthcare.

"If you're Chuck Schumer, I'm dangerous," he told a boisterous Detroit crowd at Wayne County Community College on the Saturday afternoon that I traveled with him. "If you're AIPAC, I'm dangerous. If you're a corporate PAC, I'm dangerous. If you're Blue Cross Blue Shield's CEO, I'm pretty damn dangerous."

Unlike many candidates, El-Sayed doesn't hedge in his health care rhetoric. He is unabashedly maximalist, operating under the assumption that there is now far more running room on the healthcare issue than the political establishment realizes.

"I do not condone at all the murder of anybody, but a health insurance CEO got murdered in cold blood, and everybody sided with the murderer," he told me. "That just tells you where people are. They are sick and tired of this system. They hate it, and so they want it solved, and I think we have an opportunity to actually go and solve it for them. What is politics except for trying to make sure that government can address people's biggest problems?"

Donate To The Lever

"It Was Managed Decline"

McMorrow's demise and El-Sayed's rise are more than just a reminder that scolds often lose to happy warriors. The trends are a sign that after decades of Democrats doing the Lucy-with-the-football routine of promising big things and then delivering almost nothing, many Democratic voters are finally done with politicians telling them that the bare minimum is impossible.

That shift in Democratic politics is long overdue — and predictable. In a country where politicians bailed out bankers foreclosing on millions of people, and where billionaires get everything they want from the political system, fewer and fewer voters are accepting the idea that the rest of us should always get nothing.

The swing voter is no longer the financially comfortable country club suburbanite looking for modest tweaks and the polite politics of managed decline. It is the financially strapped anti-system voter who sees the economy as predatory, who sees the government as a corrupt enabler of said predation, and who wants the entire rotting machine torn to pieces and a new one built in its place.

"I have never seen this level of anger, frustration, discontent, and anti-elite, anti-billionaire populist sentiment," one pollster recently told *The New York Times* after surveying Michigan

voters.

This might explain why survey data show El-Sayed's populist campaign is particularly resonant among the most anti-system voters of all: independents, who are allowed to vote in Michigan's Democratic primaries. It might also explain new polling data from an El-Sayed-backing super PAC showing that he leads Stevens as the second choice of McMorrow voters, giving him a commanding 20-point lead heading into the final weeks of the primary (though other polls tell a different story).

But will that strength and that anti-system vibe sustain? Will it now power El-Sayed's to victory in his one-on-one primary battle with Stevens, an even more explicit establishment naysayer than McMorrow?

A lot of money is being spent by Stevens' allies to make sure it doesn't.

The corporate class knows that El-Sayed winning a swing state with such an explicitly populist campaign — particularly on healthcare and against military funding for foreign governments, including Israel — could inspire similar candidacies up and down the ballot across the country. And so big money players like AIPAC and a dark money super PAC are spending millions to boost Stevens, who once briefly supported Medicare for All and then reversed herself — and who touts herself as a staunch supporter of Israel, even amid the genocide.

Those donors are aiming to stop El-Sayed's revolution before it advances — and it is not yet clear whether McMorrow's big-name endorsers like Warren will jump in to now help El-Sayed in the weeks before the August 4 primary.

In Stevens, establishment Democrats and their donors have an explicit opponent of the kind of transformative change El-Sayed is championing.

"Stevens called me a while back to ask me for money," recounted Democratic strategist Mike Lux in a recent Substack post. "She volunteered the observation that Democrats should not be looking to do big things right now. She said we need to be modest in our policy goals: 'not try to pass big programs like Social Security.'"

Stevens' corporate-friendly incrementalism is reminiscent of the state's junior senator, Elissa Slotkin, a former Bush national security official turned anti-Medicare-for-All Democrat who eked out a victory in 2024 against Republican former U.S. Rep. Mike Rogers. And so with Rogers expected to once again be Republicans' Senate nominee in 2026, what about the old electability argument that Stevens has been making? What about the idea that Democrats' safest move is to just run back the kind of incrementalist campaign that Slotkin ran two years ago and Stevens seems to be mimicking today?

“We’re 100 percent going to start losing if we do that, because part of what you have to look at is voter enthusiasm about a candidate,” El-Sayed supporter Yousef Rahbi, a former Democratic state legislative leader, told me at an Ann Arbor rally. “There’s a whole swath of people that did not turn out to vote in that (2024) election… Somebody like Abdul is activating a base of voters that have not been registered to vote before, that have not been active in politics, and they’re now showing up, they’re changing the game, they’re changing the math of the electoral politics in the state.”

Rahbi then added that Abdul losing poses a potential general-election enthusiasm gap.

“If we don’t get Abdul on that general election ballot, you’re going to have a lot of people that are going to turn away from voting,” he said.

For his part on the Slotkin question, El-Sayed noted that Rogers underperformed Trump in Michigan in 2024 by a far wider margin than Slotkin underperformed Vice President Kamala Harris — which he suggests proves that Rogers is a decidedly weak candidate and that Slotkin’s campaign “was not some sort of insurgent win.”

El-Sayed then made a bigger argument to me about ambition, in sports vernacular that you can almost imagine him using in a speech to teammates when he was captain of Oxford’s lacrosse team.

“For a long time, our approach to winning has been — play not to lose, and if you cannot lose, then that’s it, you keep the seat,” he told me toward the end of our coffeeshop interview, just before heading off to another rally. “I don’t play not to lose. We’re playing to win. And I think we’ve only ever run one play, and the assumption is no other play can work. Well, too often, the play we run doesn’t work either, and I think we have an opportunity to fight to win… So I’m not OK not losing to Mike Rogers by half a percent. I wanna beat him by seven… I’m gonna take the fight to him, but I’m gonna take the fight to him because he is the epitome of corporate politics.”

The next morning when I met El-Sayed at his home for a workout in his basement, he made clear that he harbors far greater aspirations than just defeating Rogers — and he expressed frustration with Democrats who believe their job is to merely restore a sense of normalcy to American politics in an era upended by MAGA.

“All these candidates who are like, ‘We just got to go back to stability,’ and I’m like, stability was unstable, it was just a slow kind of unstable — it was managed decline,” he said between bench presses and bar lifts at the crack of dawn. “What people don’t like is finding it harder to live their life every year.”

And then for one brief sweaty moment, he imagined how his win could transform the entire Democratic Party now — and in the next presidential election.

“My goal is that we blow the door wide open in terms of how to think about 2028,” he said. “If you’re not running with a very bold sense of where we go from here, and you’re not running 100 percent against the politics that created Trump, you’re missing the boat.”